

Young People and Work: Evidence from the Employment Related Services Association (ERSA)

About ERSA:

The Employment Related Services Association (ERSA) is a UK-wide membership organisation representing over 300 organisations across the employment support sector, including charities, local authorities, housing associations, social enterprises, funders and private sector organisations. Our members work with individuals facing complex barriers to employment and play a critical role in supporting people into sustainable work and progression in their careers.

This submission is underpinned by the evidence of our members and our own research on the topic of young people and work. In recent years, we have published reports that focus on supporting young people into work, including '[Designing Better Futures: Lessons from Forty Years of Youth Employment Interventions in England](#)' (2025); '[Entry and Retention in the Labour Market: Narratives and Solutions for NEET Care Leaver Employment Support](#)' (2023); and, '[Off the Bench and into Work: Employability through Football Club Charities](#)' (2025).

In addition, ERSA surveyed 31 frontline delivery organisations specifically for this call for evidence. Their responses are reflected throughout this submission, ensuring that our contribution is grounded in current delivery experience and the realities facing young people and providers across the country.

1. What is stopping more young people from participating in employment, education or training?

ERSA's recent research and the qualitative findings from our member survey demonstrate that there is no single explanation for the number of young people who are not in employment, education or training. Young people are not a homogeneous group, and the barriers they face are often overlapping and cumulative. These include structural labour market challenges, health-related barriers and systemic issues within employment, education and welfare systems.

Mental health

Most respondents to ERSA's survey highlighted the growing prevalence of mental ill health among young people and emphasised that this trend should not be underestimated. Across different programmes and regions, providers report that young people are increasingly presenting with anxiety, depression and neurodivergent needs.

Several respondents noted that the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including reduced social interaction and disrupted education, have contributed to lower confidence and reduced readiness to engage with work or training.

In addition, long waiting times for mental health services, limited access to embedded wellbeing support within employability provision, and weak integration between health and employment services continue to act as significant barriers. Providers also highlighted substantial variation in mental health funding and service availability across local areas, further contributing to unequal access to support and participation opportunities.

Lack of opportunities and place-based barriers

The prevalence of young people who are not in employment, education or training varies significantly by geography. For example, the NEET rate in the North East is around 15%, compared with an England

average of approximately 11%. This reflects wider place-based inequalities in labour markets and access to opportunity.

ERSA members identified several contributing factors, including:

- low vacancy levels in some local labour markets
- poor public transport connectivity, particularly in rural and coastal areas
- limited specialist NEET provision and early intervention services
- restrictive eligibility criteria for support, including age thresholds and benefit status requirements

Evidence suggests that a significant proportion of young people who are NEET are not in receipt of benefits¹, meaning they are often excluded from mainstream employment support. This creates a cohort of “hidden NEETs” who struggle to access help.

Providers also reported barriers to re-engagement with education and training. These include inflexible course start dates, annual enrolment cycles that prolong periods of inactivity, and limited availability of Level 1 and Level 2 provision and entry-level apprenticeships. This disproportionately affects young people with low prior attainment and those furthest from the labour market.

Finally, members highlighted the ongoing instability of the funding environment following the end of the European Social Fund. The transition to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund led to gaps in provision, loss of experienced staff and, in some cases, provider closures. The continued reliance on short-term funding cycles now undermines service continuity, workforce retention and the ability to build long-term relationships with young people and employers.

Employers and labour market expectations

ERSA members report that many employers increasingly expect “work-ready” or “career-ready” candidates, particularly in the context of rising operating costs and productivity pressures. This places young people at a disadvantage, especially those without prior work experience or informal networks.

Providers highlighted limited access to meaningful work experience and supported entry-level roles, particularly for young people facing multiple barriers. There is also a lack of systematic coordination between employers and education providers to align training provision with local labour market demand.

In addition, our members often raise the point that employability programmes that support people into work are designed and pushed out without proper consultation with employers. This creates a mismatch between what is on offer to people and local labour market needs.

Awareness of pathways and trust in systems

ERSA’s research and member responses also indicate that many young people lack awareness of available support and local employment or training opportunities. This is linked to inconsistent access to high-quality, independent careers guidance within schools and colleges.

Even where support is available, young people may struggle to navigate complex systems or identify appropriate entry points. Providers also highlighted low levels of trust in statutory services among some young people, often shaped by negative or transactional experiences with the benefits system. This can discourage engagement and contribute to disengagement from formal support pathways.

¹ The Learning and Work Institute found that half of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) are not claiming any benefits at all.

2. What would make the biggest difference to support more young people to participate?

ERSA's research and evidence from our members consistently show that improving participation among young people requires sustained, personalised support combined with structural reform to funding, service integration and employer engagement.

Personalised, advisor-led support

Across four decades of youth employment programmes analysed by ERSA, consistent adviser relationships emerge as the strongest predictor of engagement and progression. Young people benefit most from named advisers with manageable caseloads who are able to provide long-term, relationship-based support.

Members emphasised that short, transactional appointments are insufficient to address complex barriers. Instead, regular, sustained contact allows advisers to build trust, respond to changing circumstances and support young people through transitions into education, training and work.

Long-term and stable funding

ERSA members consistently highlighted the damaging impact of short-term and fragmented funding on youth employment provision. Since the end of the European Social Fund, many areas have experienced reduced investment in support for NEET young people through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, resulting in service gaps, loss of experienced staff and reduced capacity.

Long-term, stable funding settlements are essential to enable providers to:

- retain skilled advisers
- invest in workforce development
- build sustained relationships with employers, schools and training providers
- deliver consistent support to young people

Members report that young people are more likely to engage when they experience continuity and stability in services. Funding uncertainty undermines trust, workforce retention and programme quality.

Earlier and preventative interventions

Many young people first engage with employment support services at the age of 18 or older, by which point barriers have often become entrenched. ERSA members report that earlier intervention with young people at risk of becoming NEET is critical to preventing long-term disengagement.

Effective preventative approaches include:

- targeted careers advice and guidance
- supported work experience placements
- mentoring programmes
- engagement activities delivered through schools and community organisations

Earlier support helps young people build confidence, understand labour market pathways and develop the foundational skills required for successful transitions.

Integrated health and wellbeing support

Mental health and wellbeing support must be embedded within youth employment provision. Members consistently reported that employability programmes without access to wellbeing support struggle to sustain engagement and progression.

ERSA members emphasised the importance of:

- integrated mental health provision within employment programmes
- clear referral pathways to specialist services
- trauma-informed and neurodiversity-aware delivery models

Improving participation among young people with health conditions and disabilities requires coordinated delivery between employment, health and education services rather than siloed provision.

Better system integration and smoother transitions

ERSA evidence highlights that young people frequently disengage at key transition points due to fragmented systems and inconsistent eligibility rules.

Members identified challenges relating to:

- reduced funding for local authority tracking of NEET young people
- weak coordination between departments responsible for youth policy, including DfE, DWP, DCMS and HM Treasury
- transitions from school or college into employment or training
- movement from children's to adult services
- repeated assessments requiring young people to retell their experiences

Improved participation would be supported by greater joint ownership across government departments, shared data systems, wider eligibility criteria and joint commissioning across employment, health and education services.

Flexible education and training pathways

ERSA members also highlighted the importance of more flexible education and training provision. Rigid academic calendars and limited course start dates create unnecessary delays and prolonged inactivity for young people seeking to re-engage.

More flexible approaches could include:

- rolling start dates
- modular learning models
- blended delivery approaches
- greater availability of Level 1 and Level 2 provision
- clearer progression routes into employment and apprenticeships

These changes would better reflect the needs of young people with caring responsibilities, health conditions or disrupted educational histories.